Niki Lauda is a 3-time Formula One Driver’s World Champion. Lauda had a terrible accident in the 1976 German Grand Prix, where he suffered major burns to his face and hands. He lost most of his right ear, and wears a hat to cover up his scares. He is an advocate of motorsport safety and withdrew from the 1976 Japanese Grand Prix because of what he said was “unsafe conditions,” which lead to him losing the championship by a single point. Lauda currently owns two airlines (Lauda Air and flyNiki) and is a successful businessman. He currently lives in Austria with his wife Birgit and his twins, a boy and a girl. I caught up with Lauda at his home to discuss his thoughts on motorsport safety.

**Q: What kind of reaction did you face when you decided to boycott the 1976 German Grand Prix?**

Well the drivers didn’t like it, that’s for sure. I wanted to race, a racer always wants to race, but I believed that something could be done differently. Unfortunately, the other drivers did not believe so. Really what could have been changed to make the race safer was something that had to be done well in advance of the race. Changing the track layout, adding run off, employing more suitable marshals, all something that couldn’t be done a week in advance. I think if I filed protest earlier, it would have opened the boycott up for a more successful attempt.

**Q: How did your accident change the way drivers looked at safety?**

After my accident, drivers did change their outlook. We knew it was dangerous. Every year we lost drivers, friends, because our racing was unsafe. My move in 1976 was just to make those aware of that. After my crash it really opened up the eyes of everyone involved. Thankfully I had drivers that were there to help, if not I would have died. The marshals were not stationed in that area, nor were our cars safe enough. I think the other drivers saw that we need to take charge if we want change for our safety. At that time, no one really cared about the drivers it seemed, they just wanted to keep winning races and making cash.

**Q: When your suspension broke going through the kink before Bergwick what went through your mind?**

I had that ”oh shit” moment for a split second. I tried to save the car, at least just spin to a stop. But the car was too far gone to stop that. I slammed into the wall, which threw my head into a spin for a second. I saw the bit of fire but wasn’t too worried until the other car slammed me. I still don’t remember which car hit me; I was told but try to forget. I haven’t looked at a replay of it; I just don’t want to see how scary it was. The next thing I know, I’m in a ball of flames and I try to escape. I felt trapped though. I try and try, but can’t move. My belt is stuck on something, and I can’t get it off. I scream for help, as it felt like eternity. The other drivers help me get out; the unprepared marshals don’t even come close to the car. Thank god for my rivals helping me.

**Q: Have you talked to Arturo Merzario, Brett Lunger, Guy Edwards and Harald Ertl since the accident?**

I have. I told them how thankful I was that they were there. I never thought I would tell a driver that I was happy they crashed, but I said it to them. That was a few weeks after my accident. Since then, we have all become pretty good friends. We all try to attend a race once a year together.

**Q: Did you still believe you could win the championship after your accident?**

It didn’t cross my mind immediately. Honestly not until Japan did it cross my mind. I hadn’t really looked at the standings since Germany. I knew I was ahead, but my first thoughts were that I was going to die. I felt so much pain any thoughts refocused my burns. In Italy, I was just happy to race again. I really didn’t think I would. It seemed no one else did, as well. I just was focused on recovery after the accident. Not so much trying to win a championship

**Q: How did the team react once you pulled off in Japan?**

The team was furious. They didn’t appreciate my move at all. In all honestly, the FIA should not have allowed that race to start. I don’t mind racing in the rain, but that was ridiculous. The next year it was a bit tough. We won the championship the year after, which did make up for losing it the year before, but there was too much tension. I just couldn’t be around that so I decided to move on. We only lost by one point, but with Ferrari winning is everything so it doesn’t matter how we lost. As a racer losing by one point does suck. The team members seemed to understand but were disappointed at the same time. I had to leave the next year because I just did not feel wanted anymore. It was difficult to leave; I loved Ferrari, but just could not stay with the hostility.

**Q: If you could change one thing about your racing career, what would you change?**

I would not change anything. I’m a firm believer in no regrets.

**Q: What is one thing you would change about racing safety today?**

I would just make sure that every car is as safe as possible. We need to keep advancing safety, not waiting until someone dies to advance it, which is usually what happens. It’s quite sad that it has to come to this, but that usually opens up eyes to the danger. As a fan, I do not want to see anyone die in a racecar, or die at the track. Racing will never be completely safe, but it can be as safe as possible, and can keep advancing to try and reach the unachievable goal of being completely safe.